

Remarks to Oklahoma City “Thank You America” Participants September 27, 1995

Thank you, Governor Keating. I want to thank so many people who are here who made me immensely proud to be an American and to have the opportunity to serve during this sad but amazing episode in our Nation’s history.

First, I thank Governor Keating for his outstanding leadership. It’s a little-known fact, but about 30 years ago in this city, Frank Keating and I were college classmates. And life took us in different directions and to different parties and different pursuits. But when I watched him during this crisis, I saw the same person I had admired 30 years ago and had felt good about, about his strength and his eloquence and his conviction. And the people of Oklahoma were very fortunate to have him as their Governor during this period. I thank Mrs. Keating for the work she did, especially on that memorial service which will live in the minds and hearts of every one of us who participated in it, and I imagine every American who saw it, for as long as we live. I thank Mayor Norick and Mrs. Norick. I saw the mayor earlier, and the first time I talked to him and then when I came down to see him, I thought, of all the things you ever imagined could happen to you when you run for mayor, this is the one thing you never signed on for. But I think that he and his representatives here from the police and fire department and the people from the Oklahoma National Guard and the Oklahoma Emergency Management Agency who are represented here did a very, very fine job.

I think you saw once again, when my old friend James Lee Witt was up here talking about it—he lives this job more than anybody who has ever headed the Federal Emergency Management Agency. And I think he has done great credit to that agency, and he’s made America feel secure in times of trouble, whatever the trouble is. And I thank him for that.

I want to say to Mr. Stinnett and the people from Fairfax County, Mr. Mathias and the people from Virginia Beach, Lieutenant Carr and the people from Montgomery County, and all the brave men and women who answered the call, I thank you very much. Let me also thank the Governor and the mayor for bringing our new Miss America here. I thought she did mag-

nificently well in the contest the other night. Congratulations to you. We’re glad to see you here.

It is a tribute to the leadership and to the strength of Oklahomans that in the midst of their own continuing recovery, they took the trouble and time to come here and tour this country to thank those of you who assisted them in their hour of need. As I said at the time, and I want to say again, one of the lessons of the Oklahoma City tragedy is that, although they lost a very great deal, they did not lose America. They have not forgotten that. And I really appreciated what the Governor said when he said that if any of us ever needed them, they would be there.

I was in Florida the other day, walking the streets of Jacksonville in a high-crime area with a man who had just been elected sheriff. And we had a lot of children there who were living there in this neighborhood. And in the last 6 months, they’ve been able to drive the crime rate down dramatically. And the Governor of Florida said, “You know, one of the continuing struggles in America is for us to decide whether we’re going to be a community or a crowd.” He said, “A crowd of people occupy the same piece of land, but they don’t really relate to each other very well. They just kind of shove each other back and forth, and some win and some are left behind. A community occupies the same piece of land, and they recognize that they really are obligated to one another and that everybody’s life is better when they recognize those obligations and act on them.”

Oklahoma City turned the entire United States into a community. In fact, it turned us all into a family. We somehow found our better selves in the horror of what had happened to people with whom we identified. The feelings of the rescuers, I think, is best summed up in a note I got from the Fairfax County team. And they wrote:

“We’ll never forget our time in Oklahoma City. We still are healing and searching for the reason why someone could do something this evil to people that are so good. Now, whenever we find ourselves angry over something, we think about the people of Oklahoma and our

anger abates. Whenever we're asked about what we did there, the answer always includes meeting the most wonderful people in the country. We'd like to thank the people of Oklahoma City for reminding us of what being an American really means."

No one could have said it better than the team. Thank you very much.

One of the best things we can do to continue this healing process is to all carry on as best we can with the work that was left undone there, to reach out to the children, especially those who lost a parent or whose parents were severely disabled by the bombing.

America believes in extending a helping hand to people who are in trouble through no fault of their own. And a lot of things have been announced to help those children and those families. We have established a scholarship fund here, and various Federal agencies are working on making sure that the children of people who were killed who worked for the agencies will all be able to go on to college and have their educational needs met. And so we decided to establish a Presidential scholarship fund to assist the children of the victims.

One of the nicest things that's happened to me in the last 3 years is that this year on my birthday, the present my staff gave to me was that each of them contributed to the scholarship fund for the children of Oklahoma City. Since there will be many different circumstances for these young people, we thought it best to set up an advisory board to direct the proceeds of the scholarship fund. And my long-time friend former Governor George Nigh has agreed to chair it. Former Governor and Senator Henry Bellmon has agreed to serve on the board. We will be assisted by the Governor's office and the mayor's office. And James Lee Witt has also agreed to serve on the board.

So this fund will be administered at absolutely no cost, and therefore, 100 percent of all the contributions given by Federal employees and others here in Washington and throughout the

country to help the children will go to educate those children. And I think that is very, very important.

Gandhi once said that if we are ever to reach real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with the children. For those of you who are being honored here today who brought your children, let me thank you for that. I hope they will always remember and always be very proud of what you did for their Nation in the hour of need of the people of Oklahoma City.

Let me now say that I hope and pray that this will never happen again in our country. We are doing everything we can to prevent it from happening again. But we learned something about ourselves when it did happen that we should never forget. And I just hope that we can follow the lesson of the note in the Fairfax County team's statement. When we feel ourselves getting angry or drifting away from our fellow citizens or being less than we ought to be, we ought to remember how all of us were in the aftermath of Oklahoma City and how that magnificent spirit made everyone a little more human, a little more alive, and a lot more proud to just have the opportunity to help our fellow human beings and our fellow Americans who needed it. If we can remember that, then that lasting tragedy will always have changed America for the better.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:40 p.m. at the National Guard Memorial. In his remarks, he referred to Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma, and his wife, Cathy; Mayor Ronald Norick of Oklahoma City, OK, and his wife, Carolyn; Edward L. Stinnett, member, FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Virginia Task Force 1 (Fairfax County); Melven R. Mathias, member, FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Virginia Task Force 2 (Virginia Beach); Thomas Carr, leader, FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Maryland Task Force 1 (Montgomery County); and Shawntel Smith, Miss America 1995.